

CROSSING INTO THE BLUE

by Staff Sgt. Karen J. Tomasik and photo by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

As a child growing up, the last thing on Capt. Zensaku Munn's mind was joining the military, let alone becoming an Air Force C-21 pilot. That was then, when his father, now retired Lt. Col. James Munn, was an enlisted Airman serving tours in Japan at Yokota and Misawa Air Bases.

Captain Munn was born in 1978 at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., to the young staff sergeant and his Japanese wife, Takako.

"I remember when I was growing up at Yokota, going to school at East Elementary School and breaking my arm on a big tree still here to this day," said Captain Munn, now serving as the chief of wing operations plans for the 459th Airlift Squadron at Yokota. "Growing up I thought that one military person in the family was enough and I didn't even consider joining the military because of that."

But time changes everything, and while the captain was attending Misawa High School he hoped to return to Japan one day. He then decided to apply for and was accepted at the Air Force Academy, graduating as a member of the Class of 2000 with a major in Foreign Area Studies with emphasis in Asia.

"I took Japanese language classes at the Academy and remember having a hard time with it because I grew up bilingual and only knew the common usage of Japanese — not the classic style taught in class," the captain said. "I still correspond with my teacher today and now I'm the one teaching her things about the language evolving, since I am stationed in Japan and experience the changes in the language first hand."

Also a dedicated student of martial arts, Captain Munn studied both Tae Kwon Do and Okinawan Shorin-Ryu earning his black belts. He now studies a more advanced form called Kyokushin Karate.

"I have enjoyed studying martial arts my whole life, starting when I was a child in Japan," he said. "I've excelled in both styles over the years, but the new style I study now is even more intensive and very challenging. I am really appreciative of being able to continue my studies while in the Air Force."

The captain takes advantage of robust off-base activities like participating in a social club for people of half-Japanese descent like himself, called the Hapa Japan Club.

When reflecting on where life has taken him, Captain Munn said, "Years ago I never thought I'd be in the Air Force stationed in Japan, but I'm so grateful for all the opportunities I've had to join the Air Force and start traveling the world myself."



courtesy photo



Capt. Zensaku Munn (far left) poses with his cousins while visiting the graves of his grandparents in Japan. Growing up in Japan as a young child, the captain and his family visited many shrines in the country. He (above) performs the "Chozuya" at the 400-year-old Hajima-daishi Temple near Yokota Air Base, Japan. The Buddhist ritual involves pouring water over the hands and rinsing the mouth in order to purify the body and soul before prayer.